The menopause is an experience we will all go through; usually, we assume, sometime in our 50s. It’s not something we think of happening to young, fit women, many yet to be mothers. However, according to a new study carried out by Imperial College London, one in 20 British women now experience early menopause - and this figure is on the rise.

While the average age in the UK to hit the menopause is 52 and anything below age 45 is defined as a ‘premature menopause’, for women going through ‘the change’ as early as age 30 – or even younger – the inconvenient menopausal symptoms are the least of their worries. It’s more the impact the menopause could have on long-term health and family plans that causes concern.

**SEARCHING FOR A CAUSE**

The timing of the menopause is usually determined by genetics, by autoimmune disorders, such as diabetes or rheumatoid arthritis, or by medical procedures such as a hysterectomy (i.e. when your uterus is removed, leading to immediate menopause). But, as yet, there is no medical explanation for why a growing number of healthy women are going through the menopause at a young age.

The study from Imperial College London suggests that women who smoke and those who belong to the lowest socioeconomic category are more at risk. Other research points to genetics as a possible cause, suggesting that women with family members who have been affected may be at more risk of going through the menopause early.

Dr Heather Currie, specialist gynaecologist and founder of Menopause Matters (www.menopausematters.co.uk), suggests the trend could also be down to the success of cancer-curing treatments. She says, “Survival rates from certain diseases are much better, thanks to treatments that often cause ovarian failure, such as the chemotherapy and radiotherapy. But now there is also more awareness of the implications of a premature menopause, so it’s reported more. Women who suffer a premature menopause have a significantly increased risk of osteoporosis, cardiovascular disease and possibly dementia. Oestrogen protects against these conditions – and the earlier the effect of oestrogen is lost, the more a woman is at risk of long-term consequences of deficiency.”

According to Dr Sheeren Habib, GP at the Well Woman Clinic (www.wellwomanclinic.ae), one of the major issues of the early menopause is that HRT, the medication traditionally given to women to help stave off the physical effects of menopause, is linked to serious health risks. She says, “HRT stands for hormone replacement therapy and is designed so that it replaces the two main female hormones, oestrogen and progesterone, as these tail off after menopause. However, women who have undergone a hysterectomy, and so don’t have a womb, only need oestrogen. But HRT has recently gone out of favour as it has been linked with an increased risk of breast cancer and heart disease. It is prescribed if a woman is suffering severe menopausal symptoms, or if she is at high risk of osteoporosis.”

Dr Habib says, “For the flashes, evening primrose oil and vitamin B complex can help. For vaginal dryness, I recommend a water-based lubricant such as KY jelly. Some women choose a natural oil, such as almond oil, for this instead. For mood swings, try St John’s Wort or Valerian.”

Dr Sarah Brewer, nutritionist and author of *The Essential Guide to Vitamins, Minerals and Herbal Supplements*, says, “Soya isoflavones, available in most health shops, have been shown to reduce hot flushes by 39 per cent [Life Healthcare branches sell soya isoflavones in tablet form, starting at Dh80 for 30, www.life-me.com]. To lift low moods, take omega-3 fish oils for their beneficial effect on brain function, and rhodolia for stress and anxiety.”

There are also natural ways to help ward off longer-term issues, such as osteoporosis and cardiovascular problems. Dr Habib says, “Menopausal women need to make sure they are getting a good diet rich in vitamins (especially the B vitamins – with vitamin B6 being the most important – and vitamin D) and minerals, in particular calcium.”

“Also, bone density is reduced after the menopause, as oestrogen plays an essential role in the deposition of calcium into women’s bones. So menopausal women need to maintain regular exercise to avoid bone mineral loss and osteoporosis.”

“Additionally, it is vital for them to have their annual health checks, including scans of womb and ovaries (pelvic scans), breast examinations, mammograms, and breast ultrasound scans.”

Dr Habib advises women to beware of bioidentical hormone therapy, which

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**NATURAL SOLUTIONS**

In a survey of menopausal and post-menopausal women by skincare company Nurture, only 39 per cent took HRT medication. Of those who didn’t, 43 per cent said this was due to concerns about possible side effects, including bleeding, fluid retention and nausea. So is there a more natural way to tackle menopausal symptoms?

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**A PREMATURE pause?**

Early menopause is on the rise, with more women than ever going through ‘the change’ before the age of 40, or even 30. But why? Elle Moss investigates

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**What are the other symptoms?**

Dr Habib says, “Many women first present to me with hot flushes – these may take the form of night sweats, or a sensation of heat which rises up in the body at any time. Many women also complain of vaginal dryness and sensitivity. Loss of libido is a fairly common complaint too. Other symptoms include hair loss, dry skin, mood swings and depression.”

**What should I do?**

Dr Habib says, “Medication may not be needed, but it is a good idea for a woman to make contact with her doctor at this time to clarify what is going on and to rule out other hormonal problems, such as thyroid disease. It is also a chance for her to do an annual check-up.”
appears on the surface to be a natural alternative to HRT. She says, “The term ‘bioidentical’ means that the hormone is identical on a molecular level to that which exists in the body. Early use of bioidentical hormones dates back to the 1930s, when oestrogen derived from the urine of pregnant women was used – interestingly, horse’s urine has also been used. So the term, although fashionable now, is nothing new and, although people marketing bioidentical hormone products are trying to make it sound more ‘natural’, bioidentical hormones are actually plant-based, so still have to be synthetically manipulated to make them human-identical.”

Dr Habib goes on to explain that bioidentical hormone therapy carries the exact same risks as HRT. She says, “The dangers associated with them are the same so it is not advisable to blinker women into thinking they are somehow better, or safer, than HRT as they are not. Also, poor regulation of the alternative medicine sector that they come under can mean that quality is not guaranteed. Women with a history of breast disease (especially breast cancer, or even a strong family history of breast cancer) should know that they must not take either HRT, or bioidentical hormones.

‘The fact is, HRT is no longer seen as the panacea it once was. I rarely prescribe it now and keep a close eye on my patients if I do. A healthy lifestyle and a positive outlook are very important. Psychological support – either in the form of friends, or a professional – is also often important. The main thing for a woman to know is that she is not alone in the process.’

A emotional effects at any age, the menopause brings with it its own set of emotional issues. But for young women yet to conceive, it marks the end of their chances for traditional parenthood, which can be tough. Health psychologist Dr Melanie Schlatter (www.healthpsychuae.com) explains how to deal with the emotional side of menopause.

“I’ve had female patients in their 30s who have been advised to freeze their eggs, either because of an autoimmune disease, or because they have to undergo chemotherapy. In their 30s, many women are thinking about having children, so this can knock their self-esteem. For others who have gone through early menopause, suddenly not being able to have children is a choice that has been taken away. Many women feel that fertility is the essence of their femininity and there’s a fear that they are now ageing rapidly. “For women in their 30s, who hadn’t had children yet, going through early menopause can make them feel guilt and regret if they focused on their careers. “Women of all ages can suffer from menopause-related depression. There are negative feelings such as irritability, feeling out of control, not feeling useful, feeling sad, and finding it hard to focus. It can be quite overwhelming. “There’s also often anger – internalised against their own bodies and externalised against other people. For example, against friends who are having babies – it can make women feel resentful that friends are taking their fertility for granted. “During this time, it’s important to remember the menopause is a natural life phase – so you won’t feel like this forever. It’s like a grief process – sometimes grieving for your old identity, or grieving for the choices that may have been taken from you. It takes time to get used to your new role and identity – this is especially true for younger women. “You can still live a good life though. It doesn’t need to define you. You can still be healthy. You can still be feminine and dynamic. You can still be sexy… As with any other difficult experience, it’s about it being normalised – about recognising that other people have been through it too. And realising that while this is your experience to get through, you are not alone.”

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